



October 21, 2007

PRACTICAL TRAVELER | SOUND-PROOFING HOTELS

Blessed Silence Is the Newest Amenity

By [MICHELLE HIGGINS](#)

JUST about every traveler has a story about noisy hotel guests. The loud snorer next door. The blaring television down the hallway. The amorous couple.

Then there are the culprits inside the room itself. The rush of water through clanking pipes. The rattling air-conditioner ducts. The humming of the minifridge that seems only to get louder when you're about to fall asleep.

And then, just when you've hit REM sleep, the alarm clock in the empty room next door goes off. It's enough to negate the super-plush bed and hypoallergenic pillow menu that hotels have been offering to help you get some shut-eye. Indeed, of all the complaints that guests have about hotels, noise continues to top the list, according to a recent guest satisfaction survey by J. D. Power and Associates.

But you won't find those guests at AmericInn. That's the hope anyway of the mid-range hotel company based in Chanhassen, Minn. Last month, the fast-growing chain began advertising a new sleeping amenity called SoundGuard at its 213 hotels. It's not an electronic gadget or a bedding accessory, but a construction material. Instead of wood-frame construction, the hotel uses masonry blocks filled with sound-deadening foam, in addition to drywall that is 5/8-inch thick, instead of 1/2-inch, to muffle noise.

While some hotel chains avoid drawing attention to their cookie-cutter design, AmericInn has turned it into a promotional asset. "We think it's a real point of differentiation," said Arnold A. Angeloni, chief executive of AmericInn.

Hotels have tried to one-up one another with everything from custom-branded mattresses to aromatherapy candles to feather-soft sheets to help guests sleep — everything short of dispensing Ambien in the minibar. So why not sound-proof hotels?

Spotting an untapped marketing opportunity, hotels are increasingly installing double-paned windows, noise-deadening door gaskets, thicker walls and even listening to heating and cooling systems to find the quietest model.

Take, for example, the Fairmont [Vancouver](#) Airport hotel, which recently created a "quiet zone" on its sixth floor for daytime sleepers. Between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., housekeepers are barred from noisy chores like vacuuming in that zone and bellhops can't use unwieldy carts to carry luggage. The hotel now bills itself as "the only sound proofed luxury hotel and [spa](#) within the Vancouver International Airport."

To help drown out distracting noises, Loews Hotels, a luxury hotel brand based in New York, has been offering free sound-masking machines that emit white noise for light-sleeping guests.

And, in an example of how noise complaints are redrawing traditional hotel layouts, luxury hotels like Le Parker Meridien New York have

eliminated most of the internal doors that once connected two guest rooms.

“They are the culprit many times of people complaining about noise from room to room,” said Steven Pipes, vice president at the Jack Parker Corporation, which owns the Parker Meridien. The move was so successful in reducing noise complaints, the same tactic was taken at its sister property, the Parker [Palm Springs](#) in Palm Springs, Calif., when it was overhauled in 2004.

Other hotels are incorporating noise-muffling construction into their hotels. Kimpton Hotels is installing double layers of sheet rock for added sound insulation, and is staggering electrical sockets to prevent noise from seeping between rooms. And AmericInn is so obsessed with sound it’s even installing gaskets and door sweeps to minimize hallway noise, as well as placing flat-screen television sets on tables instead of mounting them on walls.

The company is so intent on promoting its noise-canceling efforts that it submitted its hotel rooms to a Sound Transmission Class test — a widely used measure that rates how well walls, floors, windows and doors block sound. A score of 25 means that normal speech can be distinctly heard through walls, while a 45 means that yelling is rendered inaudible. An acoustics expert hired by the hotel chain found that its rooms rated 50 or higher — even a blaring alarm clock would be muffled.

So besides asking a hotel its Sound Transmission Class score, how else can hotel guests arm themselves against noisy neighbors? David Braslau, the acoustics expert hired by AmericInn, said it was impossible to know just by looking at the hotel. Luxury buildings, he said, usually shoot for a Sound Transmission Class of 60 or 65. But higher hotel rates don’t always mean a quieter room. Mr. Braslau once stayed at [the Plaza Hotel](#) in New York, which is currently being converted into a smaller hotel with private residences, and had to change rooms because the elevator near his room was so loud.

Mr. Braslau offered some advice from his own travels.

Ask for a room at the end of a hallway, away from high-traffic (and noisy) areas like elevators and lobbies. If you're easily bothered by humming machines, ask the front desk for a room away from the hotel's cooling system, which can be on rooftops or hidden behind shrubbery.

Rolling up a towel and shoving it up against the door won't keep out much sound, Mr. Braslau said. "If there's a gap under the door, you can almost hear anything going on."

Paradoxically, he pointed out, airport hotels tend to be the quietest — at least in terms of exterior noise — since they go to great lengths to block out the sound of roaring jets with double-paned windows and thick exterior walls. And in noisy cities, he said, the quietest rooms are often the ones that face an inner courtyard, rather than the street.

If all else fails, of course, there are always earplugs.